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THE ANSWER FROM ITALY¹

BY GERTRUDE SLAUGHTER

CARISSIMA:

Returning from Trieste on a torpedo boat this morning I fell to thinking about a letter of yours that came to me in Rome last spring, the one written—do you remember?—in your friend's Italian garden beside the pool with the low parapet and the marble image of Pan. I have thought of that letter often in these last months and to-day certain parts of it came back to me with a new meaning as I sat there on the high bridge amidships, my arm resting on the base of a machine gun and my eyes looking across the tossing sea to the shore of Istria on the one side and on the other to the long side of the Carnian Alps, swept clear by the north wind and glowing in the sun. I had been meditating—between scraps of conversation with a young Italian officer beside me—upon the strange extremes of superlative achievement and desperate defeat the folds of those hills had concealed; of how Cadorna's army had made its way over them and through them with unsurpassable skill and fortitude, paying for every metre of advance with blood, and had then retreated disastrously, inexplicably, after the betrayal of Caporetto. To-day the massive peaks, touched with every shade of glorious color, were radiant with victory. Even Hermada, the single height that had stood between that army and Trieste, lifted its purple shoulder as if absolved from same. Yet the triumph, so swiftly won as to be even now almost incredible, was won, I reflected, not in the few days of brave advance, but in the long year of patient, sternly disciplined resistance. Trieste was not won without Caporetto.

I thought of that while my mind was still teeming with

¹ Suggested by "A Letter to a Friend in Rome," by Anne C. E. Allinson, in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* for October, 1918.

the sights I had just seen, while the emotions of thousands of human beings into whose faces I had looked, with many of whom I had talked, seemed to be throbbing in my own pulse. And then it was that I remembered what you had said about our parts as "atoms in the cosmic misery inflicted by Germany," of the different forms our own resistance, yours and mine, had been forced to take by circumstance, and of your attitude of waiting—of waiting with faith.

To me it would be the denial of all faith to acknowledge any "gulf" between you in America and Stefano and me in the war zone, or between us working here on the edge of the conflict and Christopher upon whom the iron hand has rested. Even the inexorable gulf that Jerry has crossed is narrow I believe in comparison with the chasm that opened up between me and a certain woman with whom I talked recently—an American in Italy—one who has suffered and endured within the sound of guns yet whose eyes have not seen nor her ears heard the things that have been revealed to this generation. You and I "tied up to the biggest thing in history," on the same windward side, on that summer day when the German army was invading Belgium and we sat among the scented pines in our remote corner of New England and spurned neutrality and pronounced our personal judgment upon Germany. The same faith has sustained us through the storm.

Believing in a faith enlightened by truth and supported by justice, we then declared that the only fitting punishment for Germany was that she should be left with only a "scrap of paper" for her defense. Yet how difficult is justice! For a scrap of paper in the hands of honest men is more than a scrap of paper; and it was written in the books that Germany should not suffer to the measure of her sins. In a civilized world she could never be made to endure the penalties retributive justice would demand.

And now—the war is won! Christopher has returned to you. General Foch and his armies have done their perfect work. Autocracy is overthrown. Germany is a prisoner of war and Austria is dismembered. The forces of Thor are conquered. De we behold a new earth and a new heaven? Was our faith justified?

It was a hard question for me to put to myself just then, for I had been watching one of the saddest spectacles of

the war in Italy, the multitudes of prisoners out of Austria. They came pouring down into Trieste, half-clothed, foot-sore, starving. Trieste had no food for them, and they were herded together in the vast open spaces of the quays, waiting until the new government should be organized and means of transportation re-established, pouring in by thousands when they could be taken out only by hundreds, huddled together in the icy wind which was keeping back the ships that might have saved them, exchanging their blankets for pieces of bread through the iron railing, standing in the mud, sitting about pale camp-fires, binding up their bleeding feet in rags, many of them falling faint with illness and dying where they fell. Was it a new heaven and a new earth?

In the Trieste hotel, the *Savoia*—until November third the *Palace Excelsior*—life began to be very gay. One met all of the officers there, military commanders and naval commanders, the hero of this and the hero of that; the commander of the port who had just come in on the last aeroplane from Pola; the well-known aviator, escaped from Austria, who was off to Venice in a submarine; the broad-shouldered general who was military governor; the Colonel of the Arditi, who had been summoned to keep order among returning prisoners; the Colonel of sanitation who was organizing hospitals with great rapidity; the famous Rizzo with a rainbow of decorations on his breast. There were officers of the Italian army who were citizens of Trieste; there were loyal Italians from Trent who had been forced to lead regiments of the enemy (one of them wore a leather coat buttoned tight over his Austrian uniform); there were officers of the artillery who had come up through the promised land, and officers of the marine who had turned their ships to the need of the hour and were going backward and forward, over loosened mines, in the teeth of the Bora, bringing up supplies.

It was not long before women began to appear in the hotel and one afternoon there was a dance. I came upon the scene out of the cold, dark street, made colder by the sound of water beating against the quays. I had fought my way against the wind from the soup kitchen of the American Red Cross where all day long we had been giving out clothing to the prisoners. The bright gowns, the music, laughter, the uncorking of bottles, smoke in the air,

a confusion of voices—I was half-dazed for a moment until a smiling lieutenant whom I had known earlier on the Piave front offered me a seat with his group of companions and I found myself among fellow-workers in the prisoners' camp. The climax of the ball was a speech by a tall commander with grey about his temples, who paid graceful tribute to the sex and toasted the ladies of "*Trieste italiana*." A moment later, as the chatter rose again, two trim, good-looking youths came toward me, introduced themselves politely, explained that they knew I had clothing for prisoners—they, too, had been prisoners and had lost everything—could I give them a cape or an overcoat? A mist swam before my eyes. Were we celebrating a joyful victory?

I should like to tell you of all my encounters in that hotel. You, with your perennial interest in every human combination, would listen eagerly, I know, to every incident. After all, it is just such particles, bright and dark, that make up the kaleidoscope which is what one sees in the war zone.

One soon began to meet one's friends, only Italians at first, then English and Americans. The two boys who came up from Cavazuccherina with our rolling canteen, shipped from Venice in a Red Cross launch, gave us an evening of high adventure. They had followed close behind the advancing army and served hot coffee to the fighting men. Ah! yes, they had seen fighting! Let no one pretend that there had been slight resistance. They had fed starving babies whose mothers wept at the sight of milk, they had passed through the Austrian lines with a Red Cross flag on their camion, and that afternoon they had set up the canteen in the prisoners' camp. They were young heroes bursting with their tales of prowess.

Some forty young English officers appeared one day, most of them aviators. They had walked out of their prison camp at the first news of revolution in Vienna and come down through scenes of mad disorder. They had fared well in prison and their stories were more often grotesque than tragic.

I had a long talk in the *Savoia* with our friend, X——, the English historian. His eyes were deeper than ever with the joy of our triumph. When I had seen him last in the Middle West, he was crushed as we all were by the

news of Russia's first great defeat. "And how much better for the world," he said, "that we should win now with the help of America than that we should have won two years ago with the help of Russia!" "It seems like a dream," he murmured, "like a dream!"

A very different experience was my conversation with an Austrian sympathizer, a woman who was letting her mother starve in Venice and die of grief while she stayed by a rich Austrian aunt. I was almost sorry she was not there later in the evening when two women and several men were driven out of the hotel with cries of "*Fuori Tedeschi!*" Still another participant was a reformer from Fiume, a tall, lank man who was forever haranging a group of listeners, declaring "It was for *this*, and for *that*, and for nothing else that the Italian soldier offered up his life." Sometimes he drew fire and there were discussions, and once a pink-cheeked lieutenant answered: "Nonsense! Italy was at war and the Italian soldier only did his duty. The rest is nonsense." And there was the soft-voiced lady of Trieste who had concealed twenty escaped prisoners in her house and defended a hospital at the point of her bayonet.

Images of all these people floated before my eyes this morning as I thought of your hopeful letter, and with them images of how many kinds and qualities of men among the prisoners!—men of every type of manhood, from the dull earthen creature who clutched the shoes we gave him like some dumb animal to strong, nimble youths with the light and fire of genius in their faces; from priggish little officers who cuffed their men about and wanted everything for themselves to the one who, above all others, I shall remember as of the kinship of Saint Francis of Assisi, one who took every burden upon himself to save his men, one to whom the most menial task held no indignity. He had the eyes of a dreamer and the virtues of a saint. But for the most part it was a dreary morass of unkempt, suffering humanity into which every hope of a new era seemed to sink far out of reach.

My young friend, the Capitano, who stood beside me on the torpedo boat, drew me up sharply by one of his comments. I call him my friend advisedly, though I had never seen him before and did not know his name until we landed. However, I knew the basic principle of his

life, his religious and political theories, his valuation of science, his judgment of the nations, and his reverence for Italy. I knew that he was a physicist in the University of Bologna, that he had a magnificent appetite and a wholesome fear of alcohol. He had clear, straight eyes, a firm mouth, and a face that rippled all over when some idea pleased him. I knew much of his experience of life and his hopes for the future. The crossing lasted four hours and I spent much of that time in meditation. One makes friends with great rapidity in the war zone.

I was giving the Capitano an account of the King's entrance into Trieste, involving a contrast which had left a rather unpleasant impression upon my mind, as I had seen it from the high deck of an old Austrian-Lloyd steamer—the very one, perhaps, on which you and I sailed to Greece from this same harbor in that youthful wander-year of which you wrote. She was lying by the dock ready to put out for Venice when the destroyer, *L'Audace*, bearing the King, drew up on the other side of the narrow pier. I saw the King and his officers in their long grey-green capes; I saw the bridge decked in tricolour placed for the King's feet; I saw him descend and enter an automobile and pass through the lines of bersaglieri to the central square. I heard the salutes of the waiting crowd, the music of the bands, the cheers that greeted the speech of welcome and the King's reply. All this I saw and heard with the emotions of a life-long lover of Italy, of one in whom no event of modern history had aroused so passionate an interest as the Italian struggle for independence and who rejoiced that now in this twentieth century the *Risorgimento* is accomplished. I remember how Cavour had said that the complete liberation of Italy, as far as her natural boundaries, would be the work of the generation that should come after him, and I thought of Carducci's cry:

Rendi la patria, O Dio! Rendi l'Italia
agli italiana.

And yet as I looked at the visible realization of the dream, I could see just beyond, across on the neighboring dock, behind the King and his escort, a grey sea of starving men, those same pitiable prisoners. "I shall never forget," I said to the Capitano, "the background of that picture of triumph."

"I can understand," he answered. "But did you think how happy those men were at that sight? When they thought how good it is that their hardships have not been in vain? Be assured, Signora, those men were happy."

"But no!" I exclaimed, "they were hungry. You did not see them, as I did, dipping their hands into the boiling soup in their frantic haste."

"No, but even so,—remember the Italian is an idealist. Why, on that first day when the news came of the victory the people of Trieste forgot their meals all day long. Nobody thought of eating. The Italian is like that. I am quite sure those prisoners forgot all about their hunger, even if they were starving."

When I entered the harbour of Trieste a few days after the occupation, the city was hidden by a mist and the long line of lights along the shore glowed like stars. I looked from them to the silver stars—symbols of Italy at war—on the coats of the officers about me. I was in the midst of a group of Triestini serving in the Italian army who were going home, after the long silence, to their families. I wondered if to them, too, those lights seemed like the stars of Italy and symbols of redemption. Or were they thinking of their families. They were gathered in the bow straining their eyes to see. At least I knew that when they murmured, "*Finalmente! Finalmente!*" At last! At last!) they were not thinking of that rainy day on the most wretched craft that ever put to sea, of the eleven hours we took for a crossing I have since made in three, nor of their escape from the front. These north Italians are very quiet and self-contained in their emotions. They are like their king, of whom someone has said: "He is one with his soldiers, a pure Latin, simple, serene, intrepid." I am sure that if they were to behold (as I think they did) the new earth and the new heaven they would only smile, with a soft light in their eyes, and whisper, "*Finalmente.*"

I am glad to believe with the Capitano that the Italian is an idealist. And the war has taught Italy something about the idealism of America. "The enthusiasm of Italy for America," said our English friend, X——, "is one of the best results of the war. It gives me great hope for the future." Perhaps all men are idealists in their way. What one keeps on wondering is whether the war has brought us nearer to the realization of our ideals.

For this Victory, who, after halting for such a long, weary while came so suddenly at last, had brought diverse gifts on her swift wings. A Paris friend writes, in the midst of public rejoicings, "When I see the splendid regiments, horizon-blue, passing under my window, marching to music with the King of England at their head, I watch for the silhouette of some brave young officer who is like my little François, and I never fail to find him." He was her only child and he fell in the first engagement. Every mother sees her own son, living or dead, in every regiment. Perhaps they only did their duty. But we, for whom the sacrifice was made, what do we think of it? Now that the respite has come and we are no longer nerved to the event we must ask ourselves whether the one great gift of all is ours, the assurance that the Cause is won.

Here in Venice I watch the transformation of a city at war into a city at peace with feelings often at variance with the proper glow of triumphant pride. Venice is re-awakening. Instead of silent streets and darkened palaces, oppressed by a dull weight of sandbags, there are sounds of the hammer and the chisel in the air, lights shine from the windows, façades and porticoes lift themselves free, Saint Marks is bursting its wooden frame, coming forth to the light like some enchanted image created by magic from a block of stone. Instead of complete darkness, with no light but the sun and moon, the waters gleam and blaze with lights. Instead of torpedo boats lining the broader canals, going in and out with military precision, there is a varied movement of many ships, of whistling steamers, of tugs, sailboats; launches and barges. Two American cruisers are anchored in front of the Piazzetta (one stripe of their war paint would efface the palace of the Doges) and an English and a Japanese battleship are in the same Great Basin. When the *Birmingham* blows her siren people start for a moment, then sigh with relief, for it is not an air raid, and the night-watch on the housetops is a thing of the past. The shops are opening, the people are coming back, one sees well-groomed children on the way to school (not merely the little waifs of our Red Cross Asili). A dressmaking shop of pretensions has just opened on the corner opposite the Cinema where we used to crowd about the daily bulletin. When I go up the Grand Canal in the open launch piled high with children's clothes and boxes of

condensed milk, ladies peep at me out of the windows of their black-hooded gondolas. The angel on the peak of the Campanile no longer hides her wings in a covering of cloth. She shines in the sun like a golden Victory. But in Venice the symbol of victory is the Wingèd Lion who has stood on his column uncovered and undaunted throughout the war.

Venice is re-awakening, to the joy of everyone. Yet with all the gain there is, I feel, a certain loss; and those of us who have seen Venice girt for war have a possession which few imaginations—certainly no feeble ones—will ever win. I will not regret the loss of beauty; I will not dwell upon the Venice without electric lights and crowds and business, when the Piazza of Saint Mark was more than ever picturesque by day and mysterious by night, and the smaller squares were empty, and the canals were left to their winding ways and their colour and their shadows. I will not regret these things because in the general life, in a world safe for democracy, they may count for little—although surely the Venice of history teaches us the unerring power of beauty in the fashioning of nations. But something, since the armistice was declared, has gone out of the air of Venice. The tension has relaxed, since the first frenzy of rejoicing, and things seem somehow to have fallen apart. The sense of a high purpose, compelling to unity of action, has dropped upon a lower plane or is hidden beneath routine pursuits. Venice at war was the ancient city of gold refined of its dross. She was the Queen of the Adriatic armed and disciplined. Her sword was sharpened, her mind was alert, her temper was resolute, her will was unswerving. Only for a short time did she show anxiety, and that was not when the Austrian army was within eight miles of her and the incessant guns were growing louder. It was when, upon the first news that Germany was breaking, she feared that peace might be declared before Italy had freed her territory of the invader. Then faces were dark and spirits almost faltered. "To have our country given back to us by the Allies, across the peace table!" they exclaimed. "It would be worse than Caporetto. Far worse! Caporetto was our martyrdom. This would be our disgrace. Let us have no peace that we have not won." Then did waiting become difficult because then faith gave way to fear. But the first guns of the offensive restored the universal faith and now Venice is re-awakening with her conscience clear.

But the temper of the place, since the incursions of population have set in, is at once less serious and less gay.

Below the surface the same body of workers, civil and military, who have carried the burden through all the changes, are working on as before with no other awakening than to a sense of graver problems, of added responsibilities, of more complex duties. And if in Venice, which has suffered little from devastation and robbery, I feel that the wings that would soar are weighted, how austere must be the joy of victory in the towns liberated from the invader! A soldier from the trenches whose wife and family were in the region of Udine, planted his feet firmly on our office floor and exclaimed: "*They must be freed!* I don't know when—perhaps next spring—but when the moment comes, we shall advance and set them free. Whether I die—that is nothing. *They* must be set free!" Now they are free, and they are robbed of all they possessed, stripped of their clothes, sick with memories and half-maddened with hunger. The more fortunate, who could fly before the invader, go back to find their ancestral trees cut down in wantonness and left where they lay, their ancestral furniture burned in the market place, their dining-halls turned into stables and their family portraits smashed into pieces. The dead waste of war, as inevitable as the ravages of the epidemic! The prospect darkens the vision.

When I confessed my misgivings to the Capitano, he refused to be depressed. He was thankful with his whole heart that the war was over and he believed it had advanced the world a great stride forward. Yet he nursed no illusions about the future. Universal peace, he thought, must depend upon uniform education and ideals and a fair adjustment of interests. He pointed to the menace of the Jugo-Slavs and to certain differences—I think he called them jealousies—among the larger nations. "But is there any nobler thing," he asked suddenly, with that rippling smile on his face, "is there any nobler thing than to defend one's country and drive back the aggressor and liberate one's brothers?"

It was the old-fashioned, time-worn doctrine, so scorned of intellectuals. Yet it rang true. And then by some happy chance the Capitano remembered what Mazzini once said about the right and wrong of war, and in the words of that great prophet of the League of Nations, cited

by this patriot of a younger generation, I found the cause of my discouragement and the justification of my faith.

"War," said Mazzini, "is a crime unless undertaken for the triumph of a great truth or for the ruin of a great lie."

Among all the complex reasons for the war, as one after another the nations have entered in, it has been more and more clear that we were engaged in the ruin of a great lie. But a lie in ruins is no very imposing or inspiring sight. A ruthless giant driven back leaves a double train of carnage. Autocracy overthrown spreads devastation and carries down the innocent with the guilty. The power of Christ does not conquer the forces of Thor without the crucifixion of the flesh.

The cold wind struck our faces as we turned in toward Venice, between San Niccolo of the Lido and Sant' Andrea. We passed some units of the submarine fleet sunning themselves in the lagoon and some weird old flat-boats, bearing large calibre guns, which I recognized as those I had seen on the Piave. An aeroplane flew overhead, perhaps carrying the mail to Trieste or Pola, perhaps only exercising its wings. We shall not again see whole squadrons of them flying away across the Adriatic and the line of balloons that marked the battle-front has disappeared. But there was Venice, beautiful as before the world's disaster. Her towers were of the color of flame and the quality of light. Snow-covered mountains stretched away into the blue beyond her, and the pale Euganean Hills dropped down from behind her Campaniles into the sea.

As we drew up at the Arsenal (that same Arsenal which Dante praised) I saw the American flag floating high on our battleship between the campaniles of San Giorgio and San Marco. The Red Cross launches have carried that flag in and out through the canals of Venice for many months, but it was as if I had not seen it for many years. My heart leaped to claim its promise. Every hope seemed about to be fulfilled. The League of Nations seemed an easy thing compared with what I saw there before my eyes under the sky. Perpetual peace seemed less than the things already accomplished. There was the palpable glory of Venice—and there was the new world come to the rescue of all that we value in the old.

GERTRUDE SLAUGHTER.

Venice, November, 1918